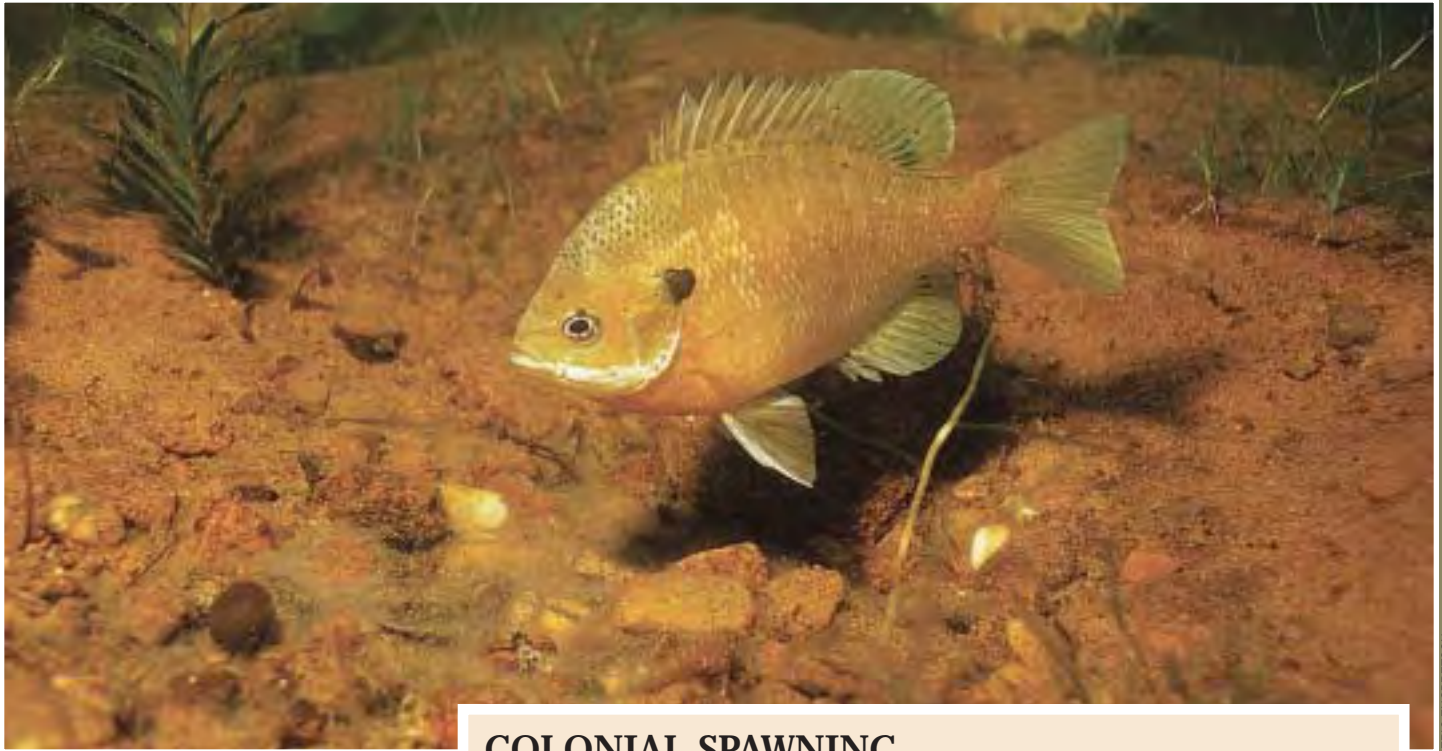


A CLOSER LOOK

By Ron Wilson



Bluegill

COLONIAL SPAWNING

To the imaginative, bluegill spawning nests could pass as crop circles fancied by pranksters.

As the days lengthen here on the Northern Plains, and waters warm into the low 50s sometime in mid- to late May, male bluegill arrive in the shallows to select nest sites. These same fish then gussy up the lake's floor by moving from side-to-side, using fins to fan away unwanted debris and mud that could later smother eggs. The result is Frisbee-size depressions, sometimes as many as a dozen or more in a small area.

With that done – and if you can buy this wonder of nature – the males make grunting noises in hopes of attracting the opposite sex.

When conditions approve, and water temperatures climb into the upper 60s, spawning begins. With the male upright and the female at a 45 degree angle, the fish touch and eggs and milt are deposited in the nest. Eggs hatch in only a matter of days.

Bluegill are members of the sunfish family. They vary in coloration, but usually are dark olive above, with dark vertical bars on the upper sides and orange or yellow on the throat and belly. Its gill covers are blue – hence the name – with a black tip on the flap.

The peak of the bluegill spawn in North Dakota is from mid-June to about the end of the month. Male bluegill are on call the entire time, guarding eggs from whatever may want to plunder their cache, and continually worrying over the nest, finning away unwanted mud and ridding the nest of unfertilized eggs that stand no chance of hatching.

Anglers understand that it's during the spawning season that the bluegill fishing can be so good. Bait retrieved too near a nest is asking to get smacked for treading too close. And the fish aren't too picky about what the interlopers look like either – feathered bait that resembles something swept from underneath the refrigerator gets whacked with the same intensity as a shiny spinner.

Scientists say that several females typically spawn in one nest and hatching success is high. But despite the best efforts of diligent males guarding eggs and newly-hatched fry, mortality of young is correspondingly high.

Yet, enough survive to continue the cycle marked in spring by unmistakable depressions in skinny water.

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